

22 APR 1970

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Operation Overflight

Ejection Threatens to Cut Off Legs
As Powers' U-2 Is Hit Over Russia

CPYRIGHT (Part in a series)

By FRANCIS GARY POWERS

Approaching the border, I could feel the tension build.

It happened on every overflight. Once across the border, you relaxed a bit. For some reason you felt that anything that was going to happen would happen there.

The weather below was worse than expected. On the Russian side, the clouds came right up to the mountains, a solid undercast. After about one and one-half hours I spotted the first break in the clouds. I was southeast of the Aral Sea, slightly right of course. I was correcting back when some of the uncertainty came to an end. Far below I could see the

condensation trail of a single-engine jet aircraft. It was moving fast, at supersonic speed, paralleling my course, though in the opposite direction.

I watched until it disappeared.

Five to ten minutes later I saw another contrail, again paralleling my course, only this time moving in my direction. Presumably it was the same aircraft.

I felt relieved. I was sure now they were tracking me on radar, vectoring in and relaying my headings to the aircraft. But it was so far below as to pose no threat. Because of my altitude it would have been almost impossible for the pilot to see me. If this was the best

they could do, I had nothing to worry about.

Impotent Rage

Odd, but even before reaching the border I had the feeling they knew I was coming.

For four years the U-2s had been overflying the USSR. Much of this time, if not all of it, the Russian government had been aware of our activities. Yet, because to do so would be to admit that they could do nothing to stop us, they couldn't even complain. I could imagine their frustration and rage. Imagining it made me much less complacent.

Ahead, the Aral Sea, was the Tyuratam Cosmodrome, launching site for

most of its important ICBM and space shots.

This wasn't our first visit to the area, nor was it a major objective of this particular flight. But since I was to be in the vicinity, it had been included. Due to the presence of some large thunderclouds, I couldn't see the launch site itself but could see much of the surrounding area. I switched on the cameras. Some intelligence was achieved, though not 100 percent.

Clouds Disappear

The clouds closed over again and remained solid until, about three hours into the flight, they began to thin; I could see a little terrain, including a town.

About 50 miles south of Chelyabinsk, the clouds disappeared. To my left I got a good view of the Urals. I began to relax a little.

Predictably No. 360 chose this moment to be unpredictable. The autopilot began malfunctioning, causing the aircraft to pitch nose-up. To correct the condition, I had to disengage the autopilot, retrim and fly the plane manually for a few minutes.

Trouble Recurs

When I reengaged the autopilot, the plane flew fine for 10 to 15 minutes, after which the pitch controls again went to the full nose-up position. The aircraft couldn't take much of this. Again I went through the same procedure. With the same result. This time I left the autopilot disengaged.

Should I go on, I'd have to fly the plane manually the rest of the way.

It was an abort situation, and I had to make a decision: to turn around and go back, or to continue the flight.

I decided to go on and accomplish what I had set out to do.

Assassination Site

Spotting a huge tank farm, I noticed it on my map. Observ-

ing a large complex of buildings, which could have been either military or industrial, I marked them down also, with the notation "big outfit" for a reminder for debriefing.



Bulletin Map by Donald De Maio
Francis Gary Powers' route in a U-2 spy plane in 1960 is indicated on a map.

Sverdlovsk was ahead. Formerly known as Ekaterinburg, it was here, in 1918, that Czar Nicholas II and his family were assassinated. Now an important industrial metropolis Sverdlovsk was of special interest: I flipped the appropriate switches.

This was the first time a U-2 had flown over the area.

New Airfield

Once past Sverdlovsk, my route would take me northwest to Kirov, whence I would fly north to Archangel, Kandalaksha, Murmansk and, finally, Bodo, Norway.

About 30 to 40 miles southeast of Sverdlovsk, I made a 90-degree left turn, rolled out on course and lined up on my next target, which was on the southwestern edge of the city.

I was almost exactly four hours into the flight.

Spotting an airfield that did not appear on the map, I marked it down. My route would take me directly over it.

Following the turn, I had to record the time, altitude, speed, exhaust-gas temperature, and engine-instrument readings. I was marking these down when, suddenly, there was a dull "thump," the aircraft jerked forward and a tremendous orange flash lit the cockpit and sky.

Time had caught up with us. Knocked back in the seat, I said, "My God, I've had it now!"

The orange glow seemed to last for minutes, although it was probably gone in seconds. Yet I had time enough to think the explosion was external to the aircraft and, from the push, probably somewhere behind it.

Going Down

Instinctively I grasped the throttle with my left hand, and keeping my right hand on the wheel, checked instruments. All readings normal. Engine functioning O.K. The right wing started to droop. I turned the wheel, and it came back up. Fine.

Now the nose, very slowly, started to go down. Proper correction for this is to pull back on the wheel to bring it up. I pulled, but it kept going down. Either the control cable had severed or the tail was gone. I knew then I had no control of the aircraft.

As it kept nosing down, a violent movement shook the plane, flinging me all over the cockpit. I assumed both wings had come off. What was left of the plane began spinning, only upside down, the nose pointing toward the sky, the tail down toward the ground.

All I could see was blue sky, spinning, spinning. I turned on the emergency oxygen supply.

continued

Sometime earlier — I hadn't felt it at the time — my suit had inflated, meaning I'd lost pressurization in the cockpit. The suit was now squeezing me, while the G forces were throwing me forward, out of the seat, up toward the nose.

Cutting Off Legs

I reached for the destruct switches, opening the safety covers, had my hand over them, then changed my mind, deciding I had better see if I could get into position to use the ejection seat first.

Under normal circumstances, there is only a small amount of clearance in ejecting. Thrown forward as I was, if I used the ejection seat the metal canopy rails overhead would cut off both my legs. I tried to pull my legs back, couldn't.

Yanking at one leg with both my hands, I succeeded in getting my heel into the stirrup on the seat. Then I did the same with the other heel. But I was still thrown forward, out of the seat, and couldn't get my torso back. Looking up at the canopy rails, I estimated that using the seat in this position would sever both legs about three inches above the knee.

Edge of Panic

I didn't want to cut them off, but if it was the only way to get out...

Thus far, I had felt no fear. Now I realized I was on the edge of panic. "Stop and think." The words came back to me. A friend who had also encountered complications trying to bail out had told me of forcing himself to stop struggling and just think his way out of his predicament.

I tried it, suddenly realizing the obvious. The ejection seat wasn't the only way to leave the plane. I could climb out! So intent had I been on one solution, I had forgotten the other.

Reaching up — not far, because I had been thrown upward as well as forward, with only the seat belt holding me down — I unlocked and released the canopy. It sailed off into space.

Half Way Out

The plane was still spinning. I glanced at the altimeter. It had passed 34,000 feet and was unwinding very fast. Again I thought of the destruct switches but decided to release my seat belt first, before activating the unit. The 70 seconds between activating it and the actual destruction is not a very long time.

Immediately the force of gravity yanked me halfway out

of the aircraft, and I came so quick my body hit the rear-view mirror and snapped it off. I saw it fly away. That was the last thing I saw, because almost immediately my face plate frosted over.

Something was holding me connected to the aircraft: I couldn't see what. Then I remembered the oxygen hoses: I'd forgotten two unfasten them.

The aircraft was still spinning. I tried to climb back in to actuate the destruct switches, but couldn't; the G forces were too great.

Reaching down, I tried to feel my way to the switches. I knew they were close, six inches away from my left hand at most, but I couldn't slip my hand under the windscreen to get at them.

Unable to see, I had no idea how fast I was falling, how close to the ground...

And then I thought: I've just got to try to save myself now. Kicking and squirming, I must have broken the oxygen hoses

because suddenly I was free, my body just falling, floating perfectly free. It was a pleasant, exhilarating feeling. Even better than floating in a swimming pool, I remember thinking.

I must have been in shock.

NEXT: Being Captured

From the book "Operation Overflight" by Francis Gary Powers and Curt Gentry. Published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. © 1970 by Francis Gary Powers and Curt Gentry.